

Protest Politics in the Marketplace: Consumer Activism in the Corporate Age [book review]

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Abstract:

Nothing conjures the anxieties of affluence like the politics of consumption. Does consumer politics augur the collapse of democratic engagement and public life? Or does it promise to renew democratic participation, rights, and privileges? The scholarship on politics and consumption has tacked between these poles, with every lament begetting an apologia and vice versa. In *Protest Politics in the Marketplace*, political scientist Caroline Heldman tackles these big questions and affirms the democratic virtues of consumer activism, or marketplace activism, in the corporate age. On balance, Heldman argues that consumer activism has abetted citizen participation and political equality, improved public debate as well as corporate and government accountability, and protected against the erosion of rights and civil liberties. While leaving some important analytical and interpretive questions unanswered, the book helpfully illuminates the relevance of the market to political imaginaries and engagement in the contemporary United States.

Keywords: consumer activism | book review | boycotts

Article:

Protest Politics in the Marketplace: Consumer Activism in the Corporate Age

By Caroline Heldman

Cornell Press, 2017. 310 pages.

<http://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/book/?gcoi=80140100143280>

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big questions and affirms the democratic virtues of consumer activism, or marketplace activism, in the corporate age. On balance, Heldman argues that consumer activism has abetted citizen participation and political equality, improved public debate as well as corporate and government accountability, and protected against the erosion of rights and civil liberties. While leaving some important analytical and interpretive questions unanswered, the book helpfully illuminates the relevance of the market to political imaginaries and engagement in the contemporary United States.

Given the essential ambiguities around consumer activism and democracy, Heldman begins with valuable definitional work. She employs a capacious definition of “marketplace activism” that includes investment, social media campaigns, and direct action as well as purchasing practices. These are activist campaigns where the marketplace serves as a “target for citizens who seek political change” (4). This wide-screen analytical approach allows her to indicate the many ways that political engagement occurs through the marketplace. But how would one know if this marketplace activism contributes to democracy? To establish empirical benchmarks for these contributions, Heldman identifies 10 practices and institutions that reflect democratic “inputs and outputs” (18) and capture egalitarian political and civic participation, popular sovereignty, a robust public sphere, state and corporate accountability, and the rule of law. If a campaign contributes to these democratic inputs and outputs, she reasons that it strengthens democracy.

After a breezy, vertiginous historical survey of consumer activism in the United States and a succinct overview of contemporary trends, Heldman investigates the democratic implications of consumer activism through a sample of 61 investigations with national profiles from 2004 to 2014. She organizes these campaigns thematically: racial and economic justice, environmental and animal rights, gender, sex and sexuality rights, and a grab bag of conservative issues. The campaigns range from efforts to rename the Washington Redskins and address animal cruelty at SeaWorld to LGBT-inspired actions against Chick-fil-A and Southern Baptist–organized boycotts of Disney. With such a broad swath of consumer campaigns to cover, Heldman presents only the basics of each one. We are told how they originated, their trajectory, participants’ goals, and the outcomes. Thus, we learn—for instance—that the boycott of Chick-fil-A followed the public statements of CEO Daniel Cathy opposing same-sex marriage in 2012; the boycott evolved through campus activism, with the goal of altering the company’s public stance and behavior; protestors staged LGBT kiss-ins at Chick-fil-A branches; pundits such as Mike Huckabee spurred counterboycotts; and the boycott eventually dissipated (no end date supplied). The boycott corresponded with a reallocation of corporate investments toward less controversial issues, temporary increases in corporate revenue, and declines in brand favorability, and produced an improbable friendship between the CEO and a campus boycott organizer (146–49).

Employing a predominantly binary (yes/no) classification system, Heldman assesses these campaigns in terms of their contributions to democratic inputs and outputs. Chick-fil-A, a campaign whose success she describes as “mixed,” received a score of 7 out of 10 for contributions to robust citizen participation, equality in participation and representation, majority rule, active media, state protection of political equality, improvement of public discussion, corporate political accountability, government accountability, protection against the encroachment of minority rights, and civil liberties. These interpretations would be more convincing if the classificatory rationale were clearer and they were grounded on detailed

accounts of specific consumer campaigns. One wonders, for instance, whether extensive participation in campaigns against *Duck Dynasty* and Chick-fil-A suggests “robust citizen participation.” Where does awareness gained through market politics lead? Is marketplace activism sustainable? Such questions linger about Heldman’s interpretations of these case studies and their contributions to democracy. Consequently, the case studies tantalize more than demonstrate. They suggest, at least among national campaigns, a correlation between marketplace activism and some reforms in business practices. Yet, this does not show that they improve democracy.

After all, the specter of corporate capitalism haunts these assessments of consumer activism’s contributions to democracy. What of corporate power? What of co-optation? What of the market as a measure of politics? Heldman addresses these questions in a suggestive penultimate chapter dealing with normative models of democracy and corporate power. Although she concedes the outsized influence of corporations on the government and citizenry, Heldman interprets consumer activism as evidence of the democratic potential of the market—to increase participation, deliberation, and popular voice in corporate practices. This is because consumer activism expands the spheres through which people seek to influence the distribution of social goods and values. Through marketplace activism, people can threaten the reputations and bottom lines of undesirable corporate actors with boycotts, divestment and reinvestment, social media campaigns, and direct action. Thus, widespread reports of political apathy and alienation need not indicate total withdrawal from public life. Ultimately, however, Heldman arrives at an ambivalent position familiar to those who study consumption and politics: “consumer activism both contributes to and deteriorates democratic principles” (215).

Amid the occupations of May 1968 in Paris, it is sometimes reported that graffiti above the entrance to the Odeon Theater announced: “When the National Assembly becomes a bourgeois theater, all the bourgeois theaters should be turned into national assemblies.” In its account of consumer activism, *Protest Politics* proposes that the paramount bourgeois theater—the marketplace—has been turned into a kind of national assembly. The book reveals the extent to which political engagement in the United States occurs on terms set by the market. Sociologists concerned with politics, economic life, and social movements will find much to engage with as well as inspiration for future comparative and historical research into marketplace activism. The matter of whether this marketplace activism turns bourgeois theaters into national assemblies remains unresolved.